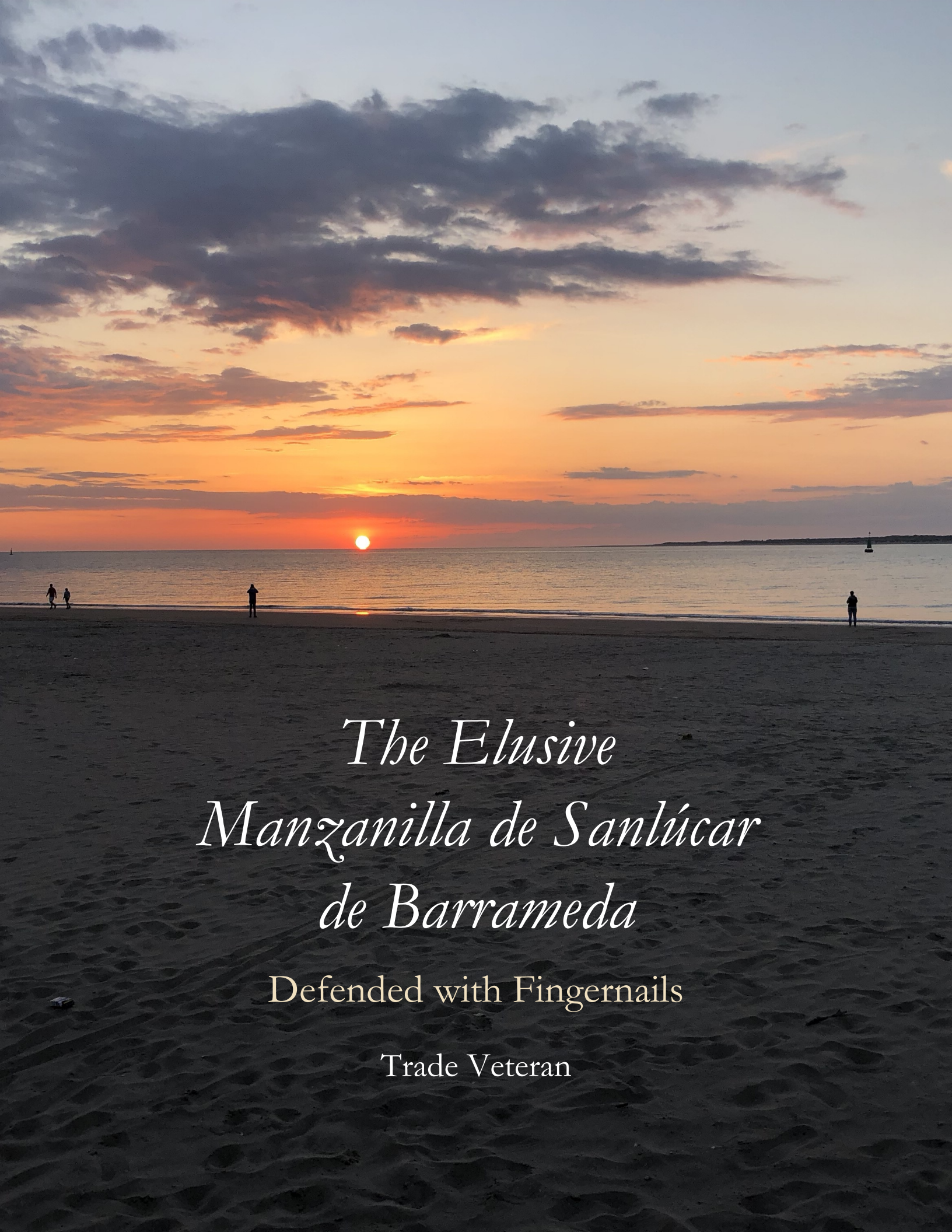

The Elusive Manzanilla de Sanlúcar de Barrameda

Defended with Fingernails

Trade Veteran

THE ELUSIVE
MANZANILLA DE SANLÚCAR DE BARRAMEDA

—Defended with Fingernails —

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I took this photograph in May 2023 at Restaurante Avante Claro on the Bajo de Guía, the working waterfront of Sanlúcar de Barrameda, where the Guadalquivir meets the Atlantic. At the table, a protegée of the legendary Lola Flores — an American flamenco artist, octogenarian — holds a *langostino* aloft with the particular delight of someone who understands exactly where she is and what she is eating. Behind her, just visible in the frame, a glass of Manzanilla catches the coastal light. She is not illustrating an argument. She *is* the argument: the food, the wine, the place, the culture, the joy — present simultaneously, inseparable, requiring no further elaboration.

Bajo de Guía, Sanlúcar de Barrameda, May 2023

Langostinos de Sanlúcar are among the most celebrated crustaceans in Spain. Their flavor is shaped by the brackish confluence of river and ocean, a minerality that is tasted rather than analyzed. The Manzanilla in the glass behind them shares that origin. The wine does not pair with the food in the sommelier's sense. It inhabits the same environment, expressed in a different form. The salinity of the one answers the salinity of the other because both are products of the same water, the same air, the same Atlantic shore.

Sanlúcar de Barrameda has always been, for me, a version of Disneyland. The comparison is not casual. Disneyland is the place where the ordinary rules of the world are suspended and everything is exactly what it presents itself to be — joyful, specific, unrepeatable elsewhere. Sanlúcar operates by the same logic. The wines cannot be fully understood outside their place of origin. The food cannot be separated from the water that produces it. The culture — flamenco, fishing, the vendimia, the horse races on the beach — is not backdrop but atmosphere in the chemical sense, something the wine itself has absorbed. You do not visit Sanlúcar and then form an opinion about Manzanilla. You arrive already changed by having tasted it, and the place confirms what the wine had already told you.

For me that confirmation arrived in September of 1983, on a first solo trip to Spain — fifteen days of exploration across the peninsula, from Barcelona to Navarra to Rioja to the Duero to Extremadura and finally south into Andalucía — with two destinations motivating the entire enterprise. One was Ribera del Duero and the wines of Alejandro Fernández, the self-taught winemaker from Old Castile who was quietly producing what would become the defining red wine of modern Spain. The other was Sanlúcar de Barrameda — and Manzanilla. Driving through Chipiona on September 18th, two days before reaching Sanlúcar itself, the approach began: a walk on the beach from the church to the lighthouse, *pescaíto frito* and Manzanilla at El Balcón del Faro, remembered simply as "The Perfect Lunch." By September 20, La Gitana was painted on any number of establishments in Sanlúcar before finally encountering Hidalgo. What followed was over thirty years of commercial partnership — importing La Gitana to the United States market through our company Classical Wines from Spain — and of defending it, in precise terminology, with fingernails.

Defending Manzanilla in the American market required a specific kind of stubbornness. For a period during those years, Javier Hidalgo and Alejandro Fernández would travel the market together, their products non-competing and equally representative of what we stood for at Classical Wines: the ultimate white and the defining red, freshness and structure, Atlantic shore and Castilian plateau. They were a study in contrasts — the proper, Britannic Andalusian and the countryman from Old Castile — and got along well. On one occasion, visiting the editorial offices of Wine Spectator, the assembled journalists politely tasted the Manzanilla. Then they pushed it aside. They wanted to save their palates for the Pesqueras. I have never forgotten the sensation of my brains boiling.

That moment contains the entire problem. *Manzanilla de Sanlúcar de Barrameda* is not a wine that announces itself to a palate organized around extraction, concentration, and fruit. It does the opposite. It strips the palate of expectation and replaces it with something that a food writer visiting Hidalgo in the early 1990s described, in the pages of the New York Times, in the most definitive terms: "Manzanilla," she wrote, "has the elusive sweetness of well water." The description is only available to a palate that has stopped waiting for something else. The Wine Spectator palates, saved for Pesquera, were still waiting.

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Manzanilla de Sanlúcar de Barrameda is produced from the *Palomino Fino* grape, aged exclusively within the municipality of Sanlúcar de Barrameda — a requirement that is not bureaucratic formality but biological necessity. The microclimate of Sanlúcar, cooler and more humid than Jerez proper, shaped by the Atlantic influence of the Guadalquivir estuary, produces and sustains a thicker, more vigorous growth of *flor* than is possible elsewhere in the region. That difference is everything.

Flor is a veil of living yeast that forms spontaneously on the surface of the wine in the barrel, absorbing all available oxygen and feeding on the wine's content of alcohol, glycerol, and organic acids. It is biological aging in the most literal sense: the wine is not manipulated toward a result but placed in conditions where a living organism does work that no winemaker's intervention could replicate. The result is a wine stripped of the conventional markers — fruit and extract — and left instead with pungency, mineral salinity, cutting acidity, and the "elusive sweetness of well water."

The wines discussed here are aged between four and eight years under an active *flor* veil. Because *flor* is alive, it is mortal. Once wine is drawn from the *solera* — a *saca*, the partial removal of wine from the oldest level, the progressively younger wines above moving down in succession to replace what was taken — it is held in large inert tanks that stabilize and blend for homogeneity before bottling. Some producers additionally reduce pigmentation, releasing a lighter-colored wine that resists the browning that oxidation brings. That fools the eye. It does not fool the nose.

The freshness argument operates across a gradient: at the *solera*, drawn directly from the barrel, the wine exists in its most complete form. Two bottled formats partially escape what follows. *Manzanilla en Rama* is bottled directly from the *solera* for the specialty market in small lots — unfiltered, fuller bodied, deeper in color, with a longer shelf life precisely because its greater density resists oxidation. *Manzanilla Pasada*, aged ten years and beyond in *soleras* where the *flor* has become less vigorous due to the depletion of nutrients, has crossed into a different category — deeper, more oxidative, with its own particular character. Neither is the subject of this discussion. For the wine discussed here, the clock starts at bottling. At a conscientious restaurant on the Bajo de Guía, the bottled product is already a fading snapshot. Further along — shipped in bottle across the Atlantic, warehoused, placed on a retail shelf — the fading accelerates. The alcohol, no longer buffered by the living freshness

of the *flor* character, announces itself more directly. The “elusive sweetness” is the first thing to go.

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There is a category of wine component that enhances food rather than competing with it. Acidity is the most familiar — the low pH of cool-climate wines that mimics the stomach's own chemistry, aids digestion, and orients the palate toward the next bite rather than away from it. But salinity is something more. Salt and acid are the two flavor elements that the human palate does not experience as satisfaction. They prepare. They appetize in the most literal biological sense — they orient the organism toward food rather than signal the completion of a cycle. Sweetness signals completion. Fruit signals completion. Oak signals completion. Salinity signals continuation.

Briny and saline without overt fruitiness is the most food-friendly of all wine characteristics. *Manzanilla de Sanlúcar de Barrameda*, under ideal conditions, is the purest expression of this principle in the world of wine. It does not satisfy. It demands. The *langostino* is not an accompaniment to the wine. The wine is not an accompaniment to the *langostino*. They are the same appetite expressed in two registers simultaneously.

The fear of Manzanilla's alcohol — fifteen percent, a figure that places it outside the parameters generally recognized in the context of wine and health — is, in the American market, almost entirely a product of ignorance. The Wine Spectator journalists who pushed it aside were not wrong to be cautious about a fifteen percent wine. But they were wrong about which fifteen percent wine they were holding. When Manzanilla is genuinely fresh — the *flor* character intact, the "elusive sweetness of well water" present — the alcohol is simply not a factor. This is not a qualified claim. It is the consistent, repeated observation of everyone who has experienced the wine correctly, in Sanlúcar, at the table, with food. People are routinely astonished by how much they can consume without inebriation. The wine does not tire. It does not accumulate. It refreshes. In this quality it is not merely equal to a dry fruity wine of twelve percent — it is its superior.

The technical explanation begins with *flor* itself. When the wine is fresh, the acetaldehyde and other *flor*-derived compounds that define its character are present in a biologically integrated form — the product of years of *flor* activity in the *solera* rather than of the drinker's own metabolic processing. The freshness of the *flor* character is not merely an aesthetic quality. It is a biological state that the wine brings to the encounter. The saline mineral profile compounds this effect, hydrating rather than dehydrating at the table, the opposite of what high-alcohol wines without this character deliver. Combined with genuine food integration, the result is a wine that at fifteen percent behaves, in the body of someone eating well in Sanlúcar on a warm afternoon, as no other wine at that alcohol level behaves anywhere else.

The alcohol of an over-the-hill Manzanilla, or of a Manzanilla Pasada, is perceptibly present in a way that the fresh wine's is not. They share an alcohol level on the label. They are not the same wine.

Manzanilla de Sanlúcar de Barrameda, fresh, at the table, with the food it was born alongside, is among the least tiring, most continuously drinkable wines produced anywhere on earth.

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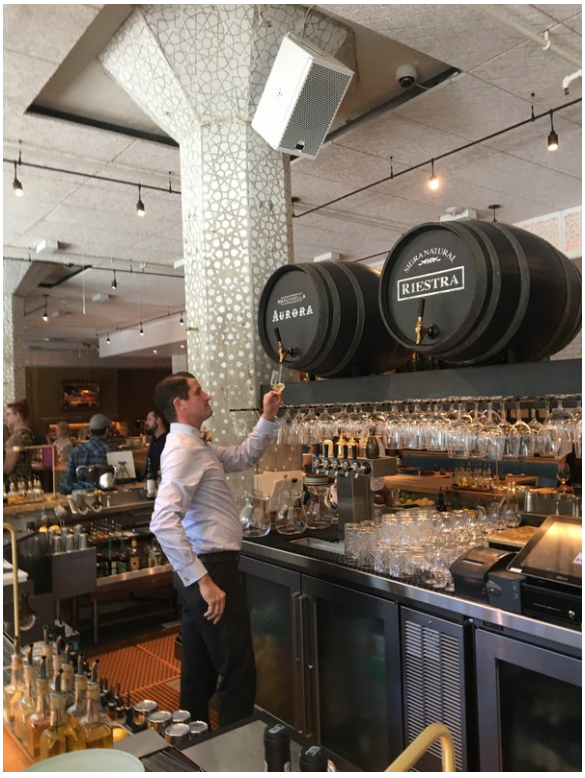
Over more than three decades of importing La Gitana, the central tension never resolved itself. It was structural, a Catch-22 built into the nature of the product: sales could only grow with higher inventories, and higher inventories meant older product. An older Manzanilla is a compromised Manzanilla. The solution was discipline — rigorous, expensive, and unilateral. We tracked La Gitana by lot number as though it were a vintage wine. The lot codes were intentionally cryptic — encoding year, week, and weekday of bottling in a sequence that meant nothing to a retailer or restaurateur but allowed us to manage inventory with the precision the wine required. When fresh product arrived and residual inventory remained, we discounted the older stock immediately to clear it from the market. We ate the cost. We could only control what was in our hands, and trust that superior freshness would be its own argument. We sold what we preferred to drink ourselves.

Aurora Manzanilla KeyKeg in Marblemount, WA



Aurora Manzanilla on tap, Bellota Restaurant, San Francisco, circa 2018

The keg solution emerged with the development of bag-in-box technology and later the low-volume KeyKeg — a disposable, recyclable polyurethane vessel with a collapsible inner bag, dispensed by air pressure applied to the outside of the bag. Beginning in 2016, Classical Wines worked with Bodegas Yuste and their Aurora Manzanilla. The twenty-liter KeyKeg format allowed filling on order from prepared *sacas* — the periodic drawing of wine from the *solera*, four times yearly — shipped directly from the bodega, arriving at the US warehouse within weeks. A special attachment allowed serving directly from keg at private events. The wine that came from the tap was, by any sensory measure, in better condition than Manzanilla from bottle served on the Bajo de Guía.

Paco Yuste was a major beverage distributor across several Andalucían provinces and well connected at the level of regional government. He led the effort through the regional government of Andalucía, securing a restraining order that temporarily suspended the *Consejo Regulador*'s ban on alternative packaging formats. He was joined in spirit by numerous smaller producers; Hidalgo itself had a proprietary keg and chilling system in development. The conflict was between producers who understood what freshness required and an institution whose formal position — that alternative packaging gave the product a poor image — prevailed in the end. Keg operations continued through 2019 and sporadically after as enforcement strengthened. Then it was over. The gradient from *solera* to consumer lengthened again, and the wine most consumers encounter today bears the name *Manzanilla de Sanlúcar de Barrameda* and the character of something else entirely.

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Javier Hidalgo was a noteworthy jockey. He personally sponsored and rode in the *Carreras de Caballos de Sanlúcar de Barrameda* — the horse races run on the open beach, the oldest such races in Spain, held each August on the same riverfront the *langostinos* are eaten and the Manzanilla is poured. The man who made La Gitana did not merely produce a wine that tasted of Sanlúcar. He rode on its sand. That compression of identity — the *bodeguero*, the jockey, the wine, the place, all one thing — is what Sanlúcar does to those who give themselves to it fully, and what Manzanilla does to those who encounter it in its correct moment.

That moment is specific. It requires the wine to be fresh — the *flor* character intact, the "elusive sweetness of well water" present and unobscured. It requires food — the briny, saline, appetite-calling character of the wine finding its answer in whatever the sea and the river have provided that day. It requires the place, or at least the understanding of the place — the Guadalquivir opening to the Atlantic, the Coto de Doñana across the water to the west, the light in the evening going down in the exact direction from which it never returns the same.

That is the direction Columbus followed — from this river mouth into the unknown. It is the direction from which Magellan departed on September 20, 1519 — from Sanlúcar de Barrameda, on the first circumnavigation of the earth. The sunsets over

the Doñana are, by the testimony of everyone who has watched them, among the most beautiful in the world. They fall precisely where those ships disappeared from sight. To sit there in the evening with a glass of fresh Manzanilla and watch that light dissolve over the marshes is to occupy the exact geographical point from which the known world was enlarged.

A food writer visited Bodegas Hidalgo in the early 1990s and wrote about Manzanilla and Sanlúcar at length in the pages of the New York Times. She left behind the definitive description.

The wine asks nothing of the drinker except to stop waiting.

Mnzanilla from Keg on Coney Island